Organ No III 12/1970

ON ANGER

By Jack Flash (David Degner)

KENNETH ANGER has a bad name. An authentic *maudit,*— witness the material difficulties he has had to face in his filmmaking and the indifference, incomprehension, or faddish approval that often meets the films he has managed to make. Anger writes of himself, anonymously, that "No man is a prophet in his own land and among his own people . . . The herd (generally instigated by their shepherds!) have always resented pioneers and innovators. Anger is called 'the Most Monstrous Moviemaker in the Underground' by Americans in his own America. He wanders over the whole globe and finds only misunderstanding everywhere." He is right to insist. The (relatively) little writing about his work that does hit print tends either to be anecdotal *(e.g.,* "Anger's new film has a sound-track by *Mick Jagger!"* "Anger's new film stars *Bobby Beausoleil!")* or unenlighteningly personal *(e.g.,* "I don't understan' it but, man, it blows *my* mind!").

Nothing seems to excite quite as much interest and to prompt quite as much reaction as Anger's relation to the occult. I'm going to try to define the nature of his relation to the occult, to define its status within his work and life, and to replace the emphasis where it rightly belongs: on the films.

Anger has characterized his own role in life in these terms: "I am an artist working in light, and that's my whole interest, really." This self-definition nicely amplifies the simpler, more obvious statement, "Kenneth Anger makes films" — invented, neatly enough, by a man named Light (in one language, at least), Louis Lumiere. "That's my whole interest, really" — though Anger takes care to strew his path in life and film with the fussy and dubious clutter of the occult: its detail, its niceties, its fine and its finer points are legion, indeed. This detail is complex in its derivation and indefinite in its particular interrelation: one man's X is another man's Y — though he's still spelling it "X".

The particular occult with which Kenneth Anger identifies himself and his work is called Magick (capital M, little k) by its inventor, Aleistor Crowley. In the notice Anger wrote on himself for the press-book to the retrospective given his work at the Film-makers' Cinematheque in 1966, he records as his *"Lifework:* MAGICK", and as his *"Magical Weapon:* Cinematograph." In the Canadian film magazine *Take One,* Anger is reported to say that "as far as the occultist thing goes, I do follow the tenets of Aleister Crowley and have about the third largest collection of his books in the world. But I don't know how fanatical I am. . ." "My guru," Anger said just this year to an English underground paper, *Friends,* "is Aleister Crowley. I consider him one of the greatest Englishmen of all time, who has been completely misunderstood. [Need I remind you to note the echo.— J.F.] I am convinced his time will come; for his message is that we are all moving through into a new era and must wake up to it."

The identification Anger makes of his work with Magick involves him in identification with Crowley himself. One can sense that this identification obtains on the emotional level, even if one cannot detail it there. One can detail it on the intellectual level *via* Anger's deep-grained conviction that this "new era" is fast on its way if not already upon us; Anger formulates his sense of (coming and present) change in terms deriving from astrology. "In 1962," he told *Friends,* "we finally left the Piscean Age behind and moved into the Age of Aquarius." Five years ago, he was telling a Berkeley-based "sex, politics, international communism, drugs" *etc., etc.* magazine, *Spider,* that these ages last "two thousand years. The one that ended in 1962 was the Piscean Age, the Age of the Fish, which was the age of Jesus Christ. . . Where the Piscean Age was ruled by Neptune, planet of mysticism, the Aquarian Age was ruled by the planet Uranus, the most erratic planet of all. It's the sign of the unexpected — revolution, for one thing. And that doesn't mean revolution necessarily taking place in the streets, though it's that, too. But it's also revolution of inner space — man discovering himself."

Anger to *Spider:* "Everything's happening on schedule. That's what's so groovy. There was a stellium in 1962 . . . The Indian astrologers . . . predicted . . . the end of the world." They were mistaken, notes Anger, and happily so; happily, this stellar event marked something far more important than the end of a world: it marked "the end of an era, the era of the Jesus hang-up. And the new thing is happening right now. The last two thousand years were based on renunciation, sacrifice, and guilt. The fight for the next generation, the next twenty-five [or] fifty years,— just the beginning of the fight, really — is skimming off the shell that's left over from the last era: the idea of guilt associated with sexuality and also associated with social responsibility." Now, Crowley ("my guru") affirms (in the twenty-fourth "theorem" of *Magic' in Theory and*

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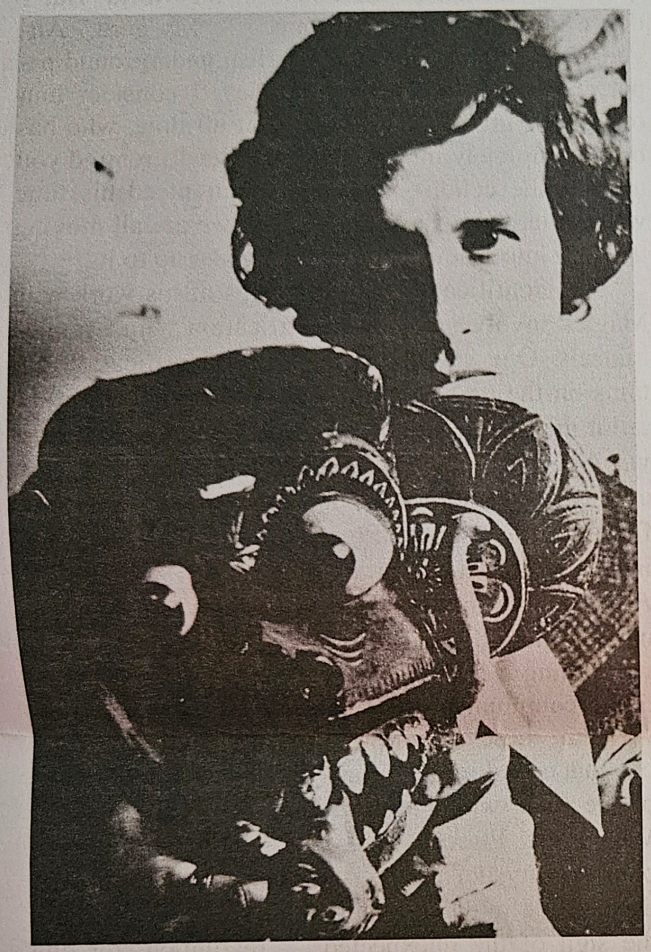
Practice) that "Every man has an indefeasible right to be what he is." This proposition is likely to win the active assent, the intense belief of any man who resists — or in the extremer cases who actively undertakes to destroy — the norms and the normality peculiar to his society.



Anger is such a man. He undertakes in and *via* his films to destroy (or, at the least, to disarm) what he sees in his society that he judges of senses to be wrong, repressive, regressive. But this is to view the aim in negative. To view it positively: he aims to liberate his society and its individual members from what checks, harms, and degrades them. In some final sense, of course, the distinction lacks real basis, for what has to be checked or destroyed in the society is local in its individual members, the persons whom he has undertaken to free. But as a matter of fact, it is precisely the final indifference to this distinction that just may explain the resistance that meets his work, the misunderstanding that "normally" greets him, the image he has of himself as one hunted or hounded, harassed and even persecuted, for such an aim is likely to make a man who chooses to think "liberation" as coming to bear on "sexuality and social responsibility" a pariah in this bourgeois society.

Film aside, now, I suggest that Anger's final aim is to destroy/liberate/reconstruct this society, at least in regard to the way(s) it relates to "sexuality and social responsibility." Magick is thus only the intermediate aim; in relation to the final aim, its status is the status of means in relation to end.

In choosing to identify his work in film with Magick, Anger acts both in defiance and by way of provocation. Anger has a taste or even a sympathy for what his peers — tastemakers! — would term cheap, trite, and vulgar. They seem not to notice, however, in what this implicates them and the judgments they pass. Crowley does. "In one sense," Crowley affirms, "Magick may be defined as the name given to Science by the vulgar." Elsewhere he flatly insists: Magick "is Science." He seems to be arguing that it is precisely this "vulgarity" that makes Magick "Science," for what is "vulgar" is quite literally "of the people": if this is false science, it is archetypally false, it is popular error.

If in some sense it is instinct that compels Anger to identify his work in film with Magick, the instinct nonetheless makes a perfect fit in terms of result with the conscious aim. For it is precisely the "vulgarity" of (at least some of) his tastes that assures Anger access to his viewers. The "vulgar" is another name for the simple, the unsophisticated; but this is the negative (tastemakers') view: viewed from the far side, it is the "unsophisticated" sensibility that is unencumbered, radical, root, real. Anger's flair for what is trite and cheap in his society is precisely what guarantees him a grasp on his society — or even a hold over it; and it is precisely at this point of contact that he can apply the pressure he means to bring most effectively.

Anger is as much an adept of film as he is an adept of Magick. His relation to the history of film is impeccable. "Melies has always been my mentor," he told *Friends;* "he showed how you could create a world of imagination with limited means and very little bread; his sets and costumes were just canvas and paper, but for me his trip to the moon is a thousand times more fabulous than *2001.* " Melies — a magician in a very literal sense (he "did magic" on stage for a living) — is Anger's "mentor" because his films show Anger not only that you don't have to have lots of money to create magic, but that in the degree that money may distract you from the material immediacy of "just canvas and paper" it's better if your means are limited — if it is magic that you mean to create. Anger has notoriously limited means. Melies shows Anger that what is disabling in Hollywood's terms is enabling for those who choose to resist them.

Anger honors Lumiere, too. "One of the most unknown filmmakers," he told *Friends,"* is Lumiere,

who grouped a number of anonymous cameramen working in the late 1890's under his direction. They went out all over the world, like the courts of China and Japan, and filmed in absolute wonder. Seeing some of the processigns and ceremonies they filmed is like looking into a crystal ball and watching something from another age." In making precisely this use of these films, Anger reduplicates the reaction of their first viewers. In saying that "seeing some of [the things] they filmed is like looking into a crystal ball and watching something from another age" he proves that their reaction was the correct one. Film does indeed record life as we live it, even if this "record" is illusory or at least subjective; the record is less durable than the illusion, perhaps, but durable enough to allow Anger to see "processions and ceremonies" in places like "the courts of China and Japan" as they occurred seventy-odd years ago now. The papers in Paris carried reports of the first screenings of Lumiere's films at the Grand Cafe, 14 boulevard des Capucines, in 1895. *The Radical* concludes its report of September 30: "Men have already recorded and reproduced speech; now they can record and reproduce life. It will be possible for us to see our loved ones alive and well long after they have passed away." *Spider* asked Anger what he thought was "the most important thing about the film as art," Anger replied: "I like the idea that an experience can be put in a can and somebody can recreate it."

He himself connects his liking for this idea with the way he relates himself, his filmmaking, and his viewers. "My films are being shown tonight in New York for the first time since the censorship law fell," he goes on. "I can't go myself, but I put them in a can and send them." It is "strange," he says, that someone can recreate the experience he has put in a can "because what I do in my films is very much wrapped up in me. I really dig the idea of audiences. I dig people seeing my films. But when I work on a film I don't think I could ever worry about whether they will like it or understand it. When I get involved in creation that just disappears. It's only afterwards that I feel it. When I really get into that creative thing of making a movie, it's just me and the camera and whatever else happens to be there."

The sense in which the experience "is very much "capped up in me" is suggested in something resembling a confession that Anger made to Tony Rayns: "I have always considered movies evil; the day that cinema was invented was a black day for mankind." He doesn't say why; he says instead that "Centuries before photography, there were talismans, which actually anticipated photographs, since the dyes they used on the cheap vellum produced patterns when they faded in light. A talisman was a sticky fly-paper trying to trap a spirit. Cunningly you printed on it a 'photograph' of the demon you wanted to capture in it." That he assimilates the literal talisman used in popular magic to "trap spirits" to the photograph used in bourgeois society to "record reality" because of the intention they share is explicit: "Photography is a blatant attempt to steal the soul. The astral body is always just latent in a person, and certain cunning and gifted photographers can take an *image* of the astral body."

The spirit over which Anger attempts to gain control is an astral body; but since the Magick he makes is the filmmaking he does, he has necessarily to deal with real bodies, persons, people. Note how he conceives this necessity: "I'm type-casting in my film," he told Jon Gott in 1966 — he was preparing to shoot the first *Lucifer Rising,* now lost — "and one thing I've found is that since my film is about demons — but love demons — I have to work fairly fast, because they tend to come and go, like gypsies." The associations and assimilations come so fast here that the real people he has to have in order to make his films are, metaphorically, nowhere to be seen in what he says about how he uses them. The people in whom he looks for the astral body are demons because it's the astral body that he is seeking. Anger told Cott a story that illustrates this process of association/assimilation: "I did an invocation of Aleister Crowley's . . .— I did it in Golden Gate Park at dawn — and as I finished it, the demon appeared in a flash of blue light. Now the flash of blue light was a ray of sunlight hitting a locket made of a butterfly wing around the neck of an escapee from Napa, and I had this demon named Joe under my control for three days before he split, leaving his boots behind. And during the three days while Joe was my guest, he told me a great deal that will appear in *Lucifer.* But since he had on the back of his jacket a picture of a demon — he had drawn it himself: a torso with two heads, one male and one female — I asked him what this was and he said, 'Well, I'm a man in a woman's orbit.' He had developed this theory about "orbitism", — his own ideas about karma, reincarnation, and this is from someone who is completely unlettered — he was a merchant seaman who flipped out — half — Irish, half-Syrian, twenty-three years old. But he disappeared. He said he'd been sent by Lucifer. And while he was with me, I signed a contract in blood with Lucifer, and Joe disappeared with it. In other words, he behaved exactly the way demons do in medieval books and I've met others since. The problem is to zap them and film them before they get away." — I quote this story at length because it points anecdotally ("in real life") to the way Anger abstractly con-

ceives what in other men's films is "role" and "plot."

Let's go back to the story. Note its logic. Anger performed an invocation; the demon he was invoking appeared *"in* a flash of blue light;" this flash of blue light is sunlight reflecting *off* a locket *around* the neck of "an escapee from Napa" — demon and escapee are still distinct here — whom Anger proceeds to qualify first as "a demon" — then as "a merchant seaman who'd flipped out," was "half-Irish, half-Syrian," "twenty-three years old," and "said he'd been sent by Lucifer." As Anger reports him, Joe is multideterminate indeed. The point to this multidetermination (it is plainly willful, of course) is indicated elsewhere, when Anger says that "a lot of what I'm trying to do in my films is like role-playing — but then that's how I view life anyway." He shares this view with Aleister Crowley. It is a "theorem" of *Magick in Theory and Practice* that "Every man is more or less aware that his individuality comprises several orders of existence, even when he maintains that his subtler principles are merely symptomatic of the changes in the gross vehicle." The anecdote (which as an anecdote purports to record real life) is as plotless as the films. It is plotless because time and sequence is indifferent to its point as Anger conceives it, which is that Joe is as many things as he says he is. The roles surface; they do not succeed one another; they surface — because they exist in depth, the depth of the instinct or the unconscious, not in time. In terms of the time we know and live, they co-exist.

The people Anger chooses to film "are forces . . . I'm interested in the aura or magnetism that people have, because that's what Magick is all about. It's a power that every person has if only they'd tune into it." Elsewhere, he makes the connection between the people he chooses and the "demons" he films explicit: "demon is just a convenient way of labelling a force, and the demons I'm working with in *Lucifer* [1967] are what I and magicians [note how he distinguishes the two] call 'elementals,' in other words, these are individuals; they have three dimensions; but their main driving force is demonic."

The first (1967) Lucifer, for example, "thought he could fly and fell from a roof — and he almost could; that's the amazing thing. He could levitate, but between that and flying there's quite a gap. He was wanted too much on the other side. He was only five years old. . ." His second Lucifer, he tells *Friends,* was Bobby Beausoleil "who was one of Manson's family. He's presently in San Quentin on death row" for killing Gary Hinman. "I'm sorry about it because I chose him because he was a powerful cat; he has that kind of extra-dimensional quality that comes across on film."

They are "demons," then, that Anger films because he does Magick when he makes films and because doing Magick amounts in practice to performing ritual. "There is a simple main definition of the object of all magical Ritual," Crowley writes. "It is the unity of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel; or, in the language of Mysticism, Union with God. All other magical Rituals are particular cases of this general principle . . ." Performing ritual amounts, then, in practice to invocation.

"There are three main methods of invoking any Deity," Crowley writes; but it is only the third that is "worthy of our consideration." It is, Crowley notes, "perhaps the most attractive of all; certainly it is so to the artist's temperament, for it appeals to his imagination through his esthetic sense. Its disadvantage lies principally in the difficulty of its performance by a single person. But it has the sanction of the highest antiquity, and is probably the most useful for the foundation of a religion." This third method "consists of a real identification of the magician and the god."

It is only much later in *Magick in Theory and Practice,* though, that Crowley chooses to disclose "the secret of success in invocation:"

"It is an exceedingly simple one. It is practically of no importance whatever that the invocation should be 'right.' There are a thousand different ways of compassing the end proposed, so far as external things are concerned. The whole secret may be summarized in these four words: *Enflame thyself with praying.*

"The mind must be exalted until it loses consciousness of self. The Magician must be carried forward blindly by a force which, though in him and of him, is by no means that which he in his normal state of consciousness calls I. Just as the poet, the lover, the artist is carried out of himself in a creative frenzy, so must it be for the Magician. . .

"Every Magician must compose his ceremony in such a manner as to produce a dramatic climax. At the moment when the excitement becomes ungovernable, when the whole conscious being of the Magician undergoes a spiritual spasm, at that moment must he utter the supreme adjuration.

"One very effective method is to stop short, by a supreme effort of will, again and again, on the very brink of that spasm, until a time arrives when the idea of exercising that will fails to occur. Inhibition is no longer possible or even thinkable, and the whole being of the Magician, no minutest atom saying nay, is irresistibly flung forth. In blinding light, amidst the roar of ten thousand thunders, the Union

of God and man is consummated." *(Magick in Theory and Practice)*

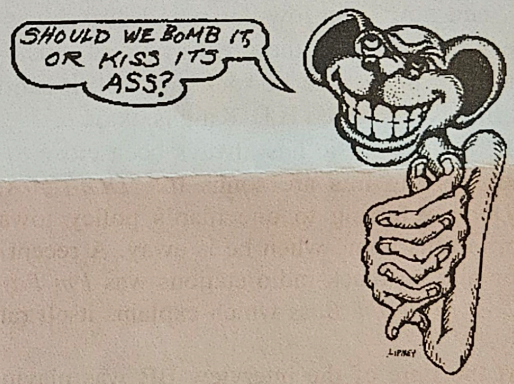
"Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will. (Illustration: It is my Will to inform the World of certain facts within my knowledge. I therefore take 'magical weapons,' pen, ink, and paper; I write 'incantations' — these sentences — in the 'magical language,' *i.e.* that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth 'spirits,' such as printers, publishers, booksellers, and so forth; and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is thus an act of MAGICK by which I cause Changes to take place in conformity with my Will.)"

This passage from the Introduction to *Magic' in Theory and Practice* (this is the "DEFINITION" that heads it, as a matter of fact) maybe indicates how it is that Anger himself would "illustrate" his claim that his "lifework" is Magick. I will not attempt to translate or to transcribe his Magickal definitions of self into natural language. I do suggest, though, that Anger's Magick relates to his instinctive and conscious aims in life as artificial language relates to natural language.

Artificial languages are created to help men regulate the entropic tendencies of natural languages. They are of use in analysis; they enable awareness. They do limit the range of what one can possibly "say," but at the same time they minimize the ambiguity and unclarity latent and active in what one does say.

I do not care to press the comparison further. I would translate Anger's "Magick" into "symbolic/analytic language" as tentatively as Crowley is confident when he translates "magical weapons" into "pen, ink, and paper." It is not tentatively, however, that I characterize Anger's practice in film as "erotic" rather than as "occult." The occult is as much of a blind in his films — in this role it obscures or occults the danger to which he exposes his viewers and their mental and moral habits — as it is a means or a medium in terms of which he can organize and clarify his own thinking and reacting. It is the conscious use of the occult as a blind that enables the films to make his point. Perhaps it is a suspicion that the occult is being used as a blind that rouses the mixed anger and contempt these films often meet. "I think," he told *Spider* in 1965, shortly after the Free and Filthy Speech controversies, "it was a very good thing to have things like the taboo word and the taboo spiders come out of the word-work. I prefer to see it in a poetic sense as part of the Aquarian Age, which began in 1962." — "What do you mean?" he was asked.— "As an artist I use astrology like colors," he replied.

The writer wishes to thank Tom Luddy for his assistance in the preparation of this article.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Organ,
Don't send samples of this filthy rag again.

M.R. Keely, Harvard Book Stores Inc. Cambridge MA

REVIEW

TARANTULA By Bob Dylan, MacMillan, $3.95, 137 Pgs.

Fuck, no! I'm not running any review of TARANTULA.
Editor